



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Recipients of the Wrath of God Part 2

Romans 1:18-23, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." <sup>1</sup>

He was in his mid twenties and he asked the question. She was in her late 50's and she asked the question. I have heard the question voiced from all ages and occupations. The question is one which most if not all who are acquainted with the Bible ask in their life. And of all the ways to derail or stymie an attempt at evangelism, this question is sure to be one of the best. For it not only changes the focus, but also raises a rather emotional subject.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible : English standard version. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

What is the question? It is, "What about those who have never heard the gospel?!"

How should you respond to this question? It all depends on the context. If you are seeking to share the gospel, I would suggest that you respond with something like this: While this is a great question for which the Bible has a great answer, we're not talking about those who have never heard the gospel. We are talking about you.

Typically in contexts of cultural engagement, this question is asked as a diversion. Accordingly, my encouragement is not to succumb to the tactic. However if the context is not evangelism, then I would suggest that there is no better text to begin answering this question with than our passage. This is the very question Paul is addressing here. Paul is describing the state of the Gentile before God which is one of condemnation.

Romans 1:18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."- that is, any and all are guilty of sin, including the one who has never heard or read the Bible.

And yet, how is it that the Gentile who has never heard God's word can be guilty before God? Paul gives a threefold answer to this question.

- The person who has never received God's word can be a recipient of God's Wrath first and foremost because of God's Revelation, Romans 1:19-20.
- See, the truth about God is not only evident to EVERY non-Christian from the witness of creation, BUT God actively shines it in the eyes of all!
- Thus, all who refuse to worship God and devote their lives to Him are indeed, "Without excuse!"

### *Man's Rejection*

We are going to look at two other reasons why the Gentile who has never received God's word still can be a RECIPIENT of God's wrath. The tenses in this section (aorist) indicate that these actions are what men have done at all times.

Romans 1:21, "for even though they knew God."

Literally this reads, "having come to know God." This is an important verse because it tells us that the revelation spoken about in verses 19-20 is effectual; it penetrates into the heart and mind of every man such that every individual has the knowledge of God in them! Though the non-Christian is doing everything they possibly can to "suppress" this knowledge, nevertheless, from this verse we see that every man has the knowledge that God exists, that He is an almighty King, and that He therefore should be honored!

Let us therefore recognize from this text that the subject of every non-Christian's rebellion is God. There are the surface complaints like these: I don't follow the Bible because of the hypocrites, etc..., the real issue is that the non-Christian doesn't follow the Bible because they don't want God, they don't like God and they want nothing to do with God.

Psalms 14:1, "The fool [this is not a derogatory title, but the word used in Scripture of the

non-Christian] has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

The non-Christian knows God and yet has rejected Him. That leads us to how they express this rejection.

### *The Substance of Their Rejection*

Romans 1:21, "They did not honor Him as God."

This phrase, "as God," receives the emphasis in this sentence! It is AS GOD that the Gentile does not honor the Lord. Many today "honor" God as the "good ol' buddy in the sky," or the "celestial goody, goody." But when it comes to His being, they refuse to do two things, the first of which is honor God.

This term *honor*, literally means "they did not glorify Him." To glorify God is to exalt Him, to recognize Him as supremely worthy of honor, and to acknowledge His divine attributes. Thus, to choose not to glorify God is to refuse to recognize His worth and therefore to take Him lightly!

This is a serious thing. Do you realize that the worst thing a person can do in their life is fail to give God glory? Above everything else, God is to be glorified! This is the purpose for man's existence.

Isaiah 43:6b-7, "Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made."

Thus, Scripture continually calls upon all of creation to glorify God. to give God His due. David put it this way:

Psalm 29:1-2, "Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name..."

Paul added this:

1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

The Psalmist abounds with the call for everything and anything that has breath to praise the Lord.

Psalm 150:1-2, 6, "Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty expanse. Praise Him for His mighty deeds; praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!"

Of all of God's creation which has not already been judged, only man is in revolt against God seeking to hide/suppress His glory. The animals do just what God has created them to do. The flowers bloom just as God designed them to. In fact, the dirt does exactly what God has ordered it to do. It is only man who is in rebellion; who refuse to give God the honor and glory that is His due.

And so, man's failure to give God glory is a serious thing. It is the ultimate affront to the Creator and the

ultimate act of rebellion. And yet this is only half of it. Notice the second way the non-Christian rebels against God:

Romans 1:21, "They did not honor Him as God, or give thanks."

Giving thanks is a type of "glorifying" of God. It is a subset of the broad calling to honor the Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:15, "For all things are for your sakes, that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God."<sup>2</sup>

Gratitude is one of the chief characteristics of salvation. It is one of the most important attitudes that a person can sport. In fact in Scripture, would you notice that thanksgiving is a specific form of glorifying God. To glorify God generally is to appreciate God for WHO He is. To glorify God with a grateful heart is to appreciate God for WHAT He has done!

And what has God done? God...

- Is kind to the all men, Luke 6:35.
- Causes "His sun to rise..., and sends rain," Matthew 5:45.
- Satisfies the heart with food and gladness, Acts 14:17.
- Is the provider of EVERY good thing, James 1:17.

When the non-Christian fails to give God thanks for WHAT He has done, it is a serious thing. God created all things to be "gratefully shared in..." (1 Timothy 4:3). In fact, we get a glimpse of the importance of a thankful heart when God says:

1 Thessalonians 5:18: "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

That is why ingratitude and the Christian is such a contradiction. Having been saved by the precious blood of the Son of God, how can we be anything other than grateful? Thus, when the non-Christian fails to give God the glory for WHAT He has done, when he fails to recognize his indebtedness to God for His goodness and generosity, he reflects a heart of rebellion against the Lord.

The picture that our passage paints is that the non-Christian lives in the midst of God's wonderful universe receiving blessing upon blessing from His hand. And yet, far from being grateful, the non-Christian proudly refuses to recognize God as the Creator and thereby affirming His majesty and glory. The non-Christian fails to glorify God by giving Him thanks for His manifold blessings. And for this willful and hostile rejection of God, all men justly are a recipient of God's wrath.

With this, notice the results of rejecting God; there are two of them.

### *They Became Useless*

First, the non-Christian becomes useless.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare also 2 Corinthians 9:12-13

Romans 1:21, "They became futile [which means to be empty, useless, ineffective, or void of result. The basic idea is that of being worthless] in their speculations."

We get the English word, "dialogue," from this word. Generally, "speculations" denotes any kind of thought or reasoning. To be "futile in their speculations" therefore is to have a mind; a reasoning, and thus a life that, from the perspective of God's kingdom, has become worthless/futile/of no use. See in the Bible, it is an "evil thought"- a futile speculation- to have the knowledge of God and then refuse to...

- Respond to this knowledge properly.
- Give God His due.
- Exalt and glorify God.

Those who do such things are of great contempt in the kingdom of God. In the words of Christ:

Matthew 5:13, "Good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men."

In the words of Paul, they are:

1 Timothy 5:6, "Dead even while [they] live"

There is perhaps no greater irony here. The non-Christian in his longing for "fulfillment" rejects God in the hope of finding meaning and significance for himself. And yet by the very act of rejecting God they discover anything but meaning and significance. From the perspective of reality/the Kingdom of God, they have become meaningless and worthless! Their life is a waste.

### *A Darkened Life*

With that notice the second result of their rejection.

Romans 1:21, "and their foolish heart [which stands for the entire inner life from which a person's direction and whole course is determined] was darkened."

A darkened heart indicates mental dullness, emotional despair, and/or spiritual depravity. The implication here is that on account of their rebellion against God, whatever the non-Christian feels, thinks, says, or does has been detrimentally affected! Not only do they lack meaning/significance, they are doomed in the end to a life of emotional/spiritual despair and depravity. This is a pretty apt description of the one without Christ!

Why is it that according to Romans 1:20 the Gentile, who has never heard or read God's Word, can justly be a recipient of the wrath of God? Because secondly, they have rejected God's revelation, which brings us to a third reason.

### *Man's Religion*

Romans 1:22, "Professing to be wise, they became fools."

Allow me to explain some of the words. The term *professing* means to strongly affirm. It conveys not only a claiming of something, but also a pretending to be something. That's the idea here! They are pretending to be wise. This means they want you to think they are learned or educated. This is the opposite of being "darkened" (Romans 1: 21). They are pretending to be the enlightened ones. From their perspective; they know, they have knowledge. Their outlook on life says, "Look what I have done and can do!" Yet it is all a sham for without Christ.

The passage says in this pretending they "became fools." This means they are foolish, flat, tasteless. This is used in Matthew 5:13 of the salt which loses its savor. Again, this is not a term of derision, but the word used in Scripture for the position of unbelief or lostness.

The idea is similar to that of Romans 1:21 and the concept of "worthlessness." By their self-exalting and deluded claims of wisdom, the non-Christian has become worthless, foolish, the epitome of lostness.

With that, notice the implication of this verse as it relates to the essence of all non-Christian religion. The more the non-Christian rejects God and His revelation the more he heralds and trusts in his own wisdom. The more the non-Christian trusts his own wisdom, the more he strays down the path of darkened depravity.

John 9:40-41, "Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things, and said to Him, 'We are not blind too, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, "We see," [professing to be wise] your sin remains.'"

The more the non-believer professes his own wisdom, the more they go down the road of darkened depravity. Listen to David's description of the non-Christian

Psalm 14:1, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' [What is the result?] They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

A mind devoid of God's truth has no way to discriminate between...

- Right and wrong.
- The beautiful and the monstrous.
- Truth and falsehood.

Thus, the more an individual rejects God the more immoral their life becomes! We see this in Genesis. Notice that the source of ALL false religion is the rejection of God in favor of self!

- Genesis 3:6: after being tempted by Satan to cast off God's authority, the man and the woman made a dreadful choice, "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate."

The disobedience of Adam and Eve was the result of a rebellious independency which, in rejecting God's revelation and rule, judged reality on the basis of what looked pleasing to THEIR eyes. The result was that man was set on a downward spiral which ultimately climaxed at Babel where it was said, "...Come,

let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name..." (Genesis 11:4)

The nations were not seeking to build a high-rise here. Rather, they were here attempting to make a statement concerning THEIR deity. And thus, God scattered them! The ESSENCE of all non-Christian religion rests upon an exaltation and worship of man! On account of their willful and foolish rejection of God and the consequent worship of themselves, all men can justly be a recipient of God's wrath.

Now with this understanding of the ESSENCE of every non-Christian religion, Paul moves into a discussion of how this "religion" is expressed...

### *Its Expression*

Romans 1:23, ""And exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God..."

Paul is piling word upon word here in his description of God. Consider each of the words. *Glory* has the primary meaning of "weight, heaviness, or substance." Thus, the "glory of God" is a phrase which denotes the manifest majesty and weight of God; it is used as the sum-total of all of God's attributes.<sup>3</sup> *Incorruptible* means "not given to decay." This is a striking expression, bringing out both the greatness and the majesty of God.

*God* is the creating, sustaining, omnipotent One! Combined, the emphasis is on the solid, weighty, unchanging King of the Universe. This is whom the non-Christian has rejected in their pursuit of self/autonomy.

Romans 1:23, "...for an image in the form of corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

The contrast here is on the ephemeral or the lack of substance. Notice the words Paul uses. The phrase "image in the form" comes from the Greek; "image" is the thing copied, the "form" is the copy. By placing these two words together conveys the idea of "a mere shadowy image" (Barrett), and thus further enhances the contrast between:

- The real and the fake.
- That which has substance and that which is but a mirage.

Paul is saying that the non-Christian has exchanged the wonderful reality of the glory of God for nothing more substantial than a mirage which, according to the next word, is corruptible. This means it is "given to decay, perishable." What is this perishable mirage? The worship of "man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." Notice the degradation. The greater the rejection of God, the further the non-Christian falls in his pagan religion:

- Man
- Then birds.
- Then four footed animals.
- Then crawling creatures.

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Romans 3:23 and Isaiah 6:3

Each of these represents a declension when it comes to the religion of the non-Christian. They start with the worship of man; the complex. But as their religion decays, the object of their worship gets more base: "...birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures." Thus their rejection of the Creator is in favor of the creature, mankind stands before God "without excuse" (Romans 1: 20). This is the end and the point of this entire section. On account of...

- God's Revelation.
- Man's Rejection.
- Man's Religion.

The non-Christian stands before God condemned, "without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

How do you respond to a passage like this? If you are a non-Christian, this text confronts you with a truth which you can't ignore. How many of you have heard or even said, "I believe all religions are an attempt at worshipping the same god. What separates them is NOT the god they worship, BUT the way they worship?" This passage clarifies this statement. It is indeed true that every religion outside of Christianity is an attempt at worshipping the same being. But according to this passage and the rest of Scripture, the being they are worshipping is NOT God BUT man and ultimately Satan!

Romans 1:23, "[They have] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image..."

1 Corinthians 10:20, "...the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons..."

Christ told the false worshippers of His day:

John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil..."

Describing the worship practices of a people who had rejected God, the psalmist observed this:

Psalms 106:37, "They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons."

It is NOT that the non-Christian is seeking to love, honor, and obey God as best as they possibly can, and yet, because of their lack of knowledge of what God wants, falls into idolatry; or the non-Christian's religion is the innocent attempt of an ignorant pagan seeking the true God. RATHER, the truth is that the non-Christian is doing everything they can to avoid God and run away from Him! When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they fled from the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> And this is what mankind has been doing ever since! They are fleeing from God!

I appeal to you, turn from your self-styled religion, and go to the one and only true God whom you have offended. And on account of the cross of Christ and Christ's work there, ask God to forgive you for the wasted years in which you have been rejecting Him. Pray that He might give you life. And then submit your life to His righteous rule, and serve Him the rest of your life.

To the Christian, those who have a personal relationship with Christ, what message does this text have for you? We learn at least two things from this passage. This text should give us a greater insight into

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<sup>4</sup> Compare Genesis 3



the nature of sin. Our passage is a description of every man without Christ. Now when a person is brought into the kingdom of God, he indeed becomes a new creature; yet one in which the presence of the old man is still felt. Paul described himself in this way:

Romans 7:18-19, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish."

Thus, based on our passage and its description of the nature of man without Christ, we conclude that every inclination to sin is in reality an inclination to exalt yourself, your ways, your wants, or your will above that of God! Thus, one of the keys to the Christian's holiness is the answer to the question, "To whom will you give your worship?" In the words of Paul, will you:

Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God [as a] spiritual service of worship"

Or will you exalt yourself? Is your life going to be an act of worship acceptable to God? Or will you live for your own glory and exaltation? The question of one's worship is seminal when it comes to the direction, goal, and bent of our lives.

Our text also should give us a greater insight into the nature of spiritual warfare. The ultimate issue of creation is, "Who will be exalted: God or man? God or Satan?" See, this is where the battle is raging. Before time began, Satan was cast out of glory and from the presence of God on account of his desire to rob God of His glory.<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, he has been in a struggle for God's glory ever since.

- Genesis 3 finds Satan seeking the allegiance of the woman and the man, not because he cares about man, but because he wanted to rob God of glory.
- Job 1 & 2 finds Satan endeavoring to rob God of the glory due His name on account of Job's devotion.
- Zechariah 3 finds Satan at it again, seeing to dishonor the Lord by calling into question the purity of His children.
- Matthew 4:9 finds Satan bartering for Christ's worship.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:4 describes the "man of lawlessness," empowered by Satan, "...who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God."

Thus, I want you to see that with all the goading of Satan, all the efforts of his hands, all his workings against you, the Church/the body of Christ are designed to dispel the seeds of doubt and disbelief when it comes to...

- The glory of God.
- His Love.
- His grace.
- His word.

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-19

- His goodness.
- The efficacy of His cross work.
- And therefore to get us to worship him!

The true nature of all spiritual warfare comes down to which statement will you believe Satan:

Genesis 3:1, "Indeed, has God said..."

Matthew 4:9, "...all these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."

How will you respond to this? Of the many responses we are to have to Satan's devices, let me remind you of Christ's. To Satan's, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me..." (Matthew 4:9). We read this:

Matthew 4:10, "Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"

This does not give you warrant to rebuke Satan as is common in the "spiritual warfare movement" of our day. Rather, this gives us the example of the conviction of Christ's heart, and therefore that which must be the conviction of our heart. We must be resolute in our trust and reliance upon God. We must be quick to say, "Let God be true though every man be found a liar." And so we must strive and labor so that every ounce of our being might be to the praise, honor, and glory of God!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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### **About the Preacher**

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